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## Stories of a Dollhouse

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Exploring our family  
Memory and Traditions

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# Spanish Flu 1919



11 November 1918 was a day of joy and hope: the Poles were celebrating the restoration of independence (*Niepodległość*) after 120 years of partition between Austria, Prussia and Russia. In Warsaw, Leon (aged 8), Ciesław (aged 6) and their older sister Małgorzata (aged 20) were not the last to rejoice after a long time of sorrow. The war years had been terrible in the city. The *Niepodległość* enthusiasm was visible and shared by all the members of the Książyk Family.

But far from this enthusiasm, alarming news were coming from France. A so-called Spanish flu pandemic (*hiszpanka*) had broken out in the final months of the conflict. In Poland, many families were still remembering the cholera epidemics that had swept through the country and affected past generations in 1831, 1847-49, 1852, and 1873. In 1891-92, the heavy toll of a deadly flu had launched an early warning alert about the vulnerability of the population and the deficiency of the public health service.

The first wave of *hiszpanka* reached Poland during the summer 1918. The flu spread rapidly, disseminated by troops returning from the Western front and the massive transport of population related to borders change.



Our Dollhouse with a 1919 atmosphere in Warsaw!

This project was launched in February 2020, a few weeks before the first lockdown during the COVID pandemics.

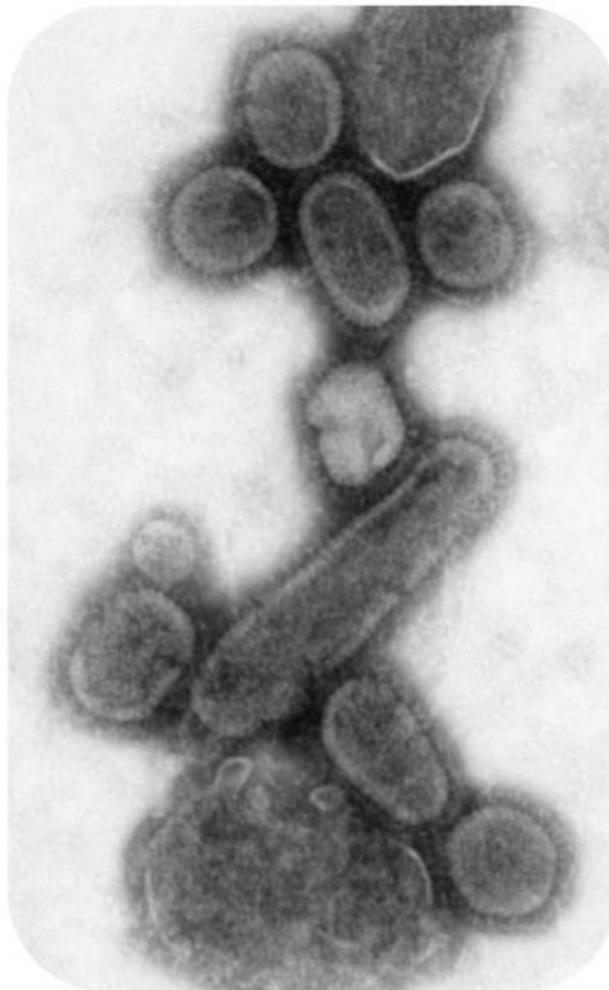
## 300,000 victims

Hiszpanka was already in Warsaw in November 1918. Observations of the time note a peak from October 1918 to February 1919. Two successive waves followed during the fall 1919 and winter 1920. Reportedly, Polish troops were still affected by the pandemic during the war against Bolshevik Russia (Summer 1920). The pandemic killed 20,000 Polish soldiers and 25,000 Russian prisoners.

Polish hospitals were overflowed by sick persons of all ages. Most people died at home from complications such as pleurisy or pneumonia. Regarding the number of people affected, there are no statistics and figures remain approximative. Łukasz Mieszkowski estimates that the first wave of the pandemic affected 3,4 to 6,5 million Poles and killed between 68,000 and 130,000 people in Poland.

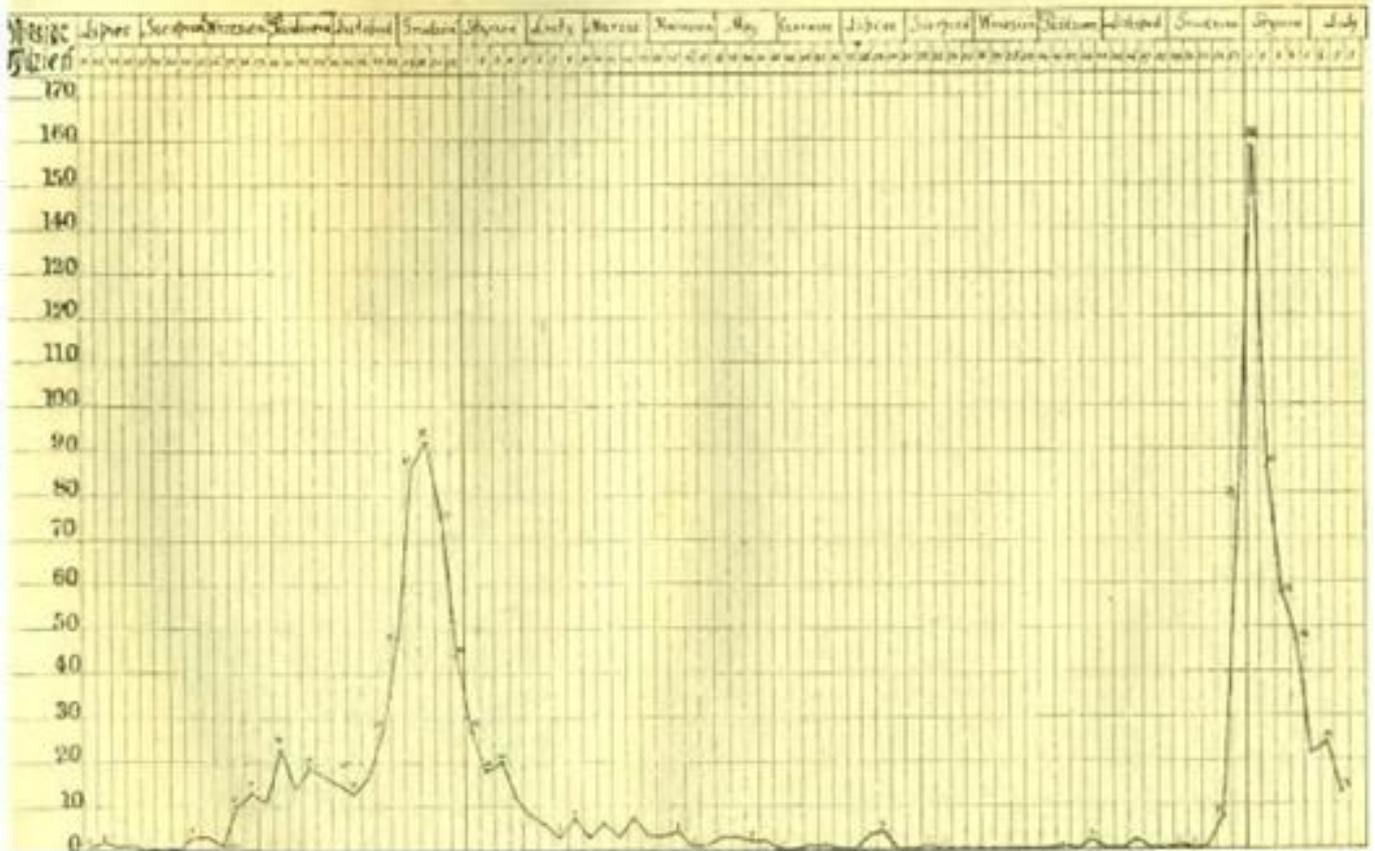
In Warsaw alone, official statistics recorded 1,189 deaths from July 1918 to February 1920. During the 6 weeks of the first wave, about 2,000 people died. Hiszpanka affected more than 800 000 people and killed between 2,000 and 70,000.

In Poland, the total number of victims who died over the whole pandemics is estimated between 250 000 and 300 000. At this time, the population was 27.2 million (1921 census). Experts highlight that **Poland was the third most affected country in Europe**, after Hungary and Spain



In 1919, there was no vaccine against the flue. The first jab would be developed in the early 1930s, validated in 1937 and made available only after the mid-1950s.

Warszawa: Przypadki śmiertelne influenzy w 1918, 1919, 1920 r.  
 Warsaw: Deaths from influenza in 1918, 1919, 1920.



## Mourning Families

Hiszpanka stroke cities and villages to the same extent. The flu was equally lethal in urban and rural environments. Reports highlight that even isolated hamlet could be deeply affected. There was nowhere to hide, just like the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

Juliana, the mother of Jozefa died during the second flu wave in 1919. Aged 77, she was living with her husband in Dąbrowa. This hamlet was located in the Kampinos Forest, some 40km north of Warsaw. We don't know how Julianna got infected. Probably attending the Holy Mass in the Górki Church, visiting her son in Czosnów or going to the market in Kazuń.



Living nearby, two Książyk families were also affected. Walenty lost his brother Wojciech (aged 55), his niece Genowefa (aged 13) and a toddler nephew. These three deaths occurred within a short period of 9 weeks, between the end November 1919 and the beginning of February 1920.

The Southern and Eastern region of Poland were among the most affected by the pandemic. The number of casualties was amplified by the population displaced by the conflicts against Russian Bolsheviks and Ukrainians nationalists. In Galicia, 17,000 people died between January and June 1920. Książyk families living in the region of Tarnopol suffered a heavy toll.

In Warsaw, a great number of refugees from Eastern regions were receiving support from authorities and Church organizations. During the Summer 1920, the war to repel the Bolshevik invasion caused the arrival of a new massive flow of refugees from the Eastern occupied regions.

## Street Anxiety

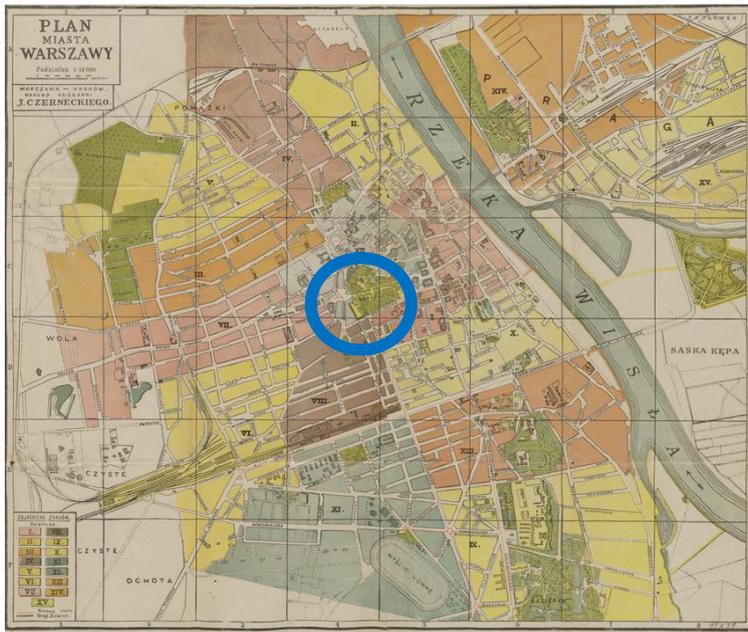
The family was living ul. Zielna 24 (Zielna Street 24). This downtown area was a very busy place with many banks, business offices and the immediate proximity of ul. Marszałkowska, the main shopping avenue of the city. Around the corner, ul. Świętokrzyska was crossed by two bus lines (A and G) and 7 tramway lines. There was a permanent flow of people in this neighborhood.

The incessant street traffic added to the anxiety of Jozefa. Her apprehension was justified. In addition to hiszpanka, there was a double pandemic of typhus and dysentery in Warsaw. While the neighborhood of the family was not affected, people were circulating and the risks was serious.



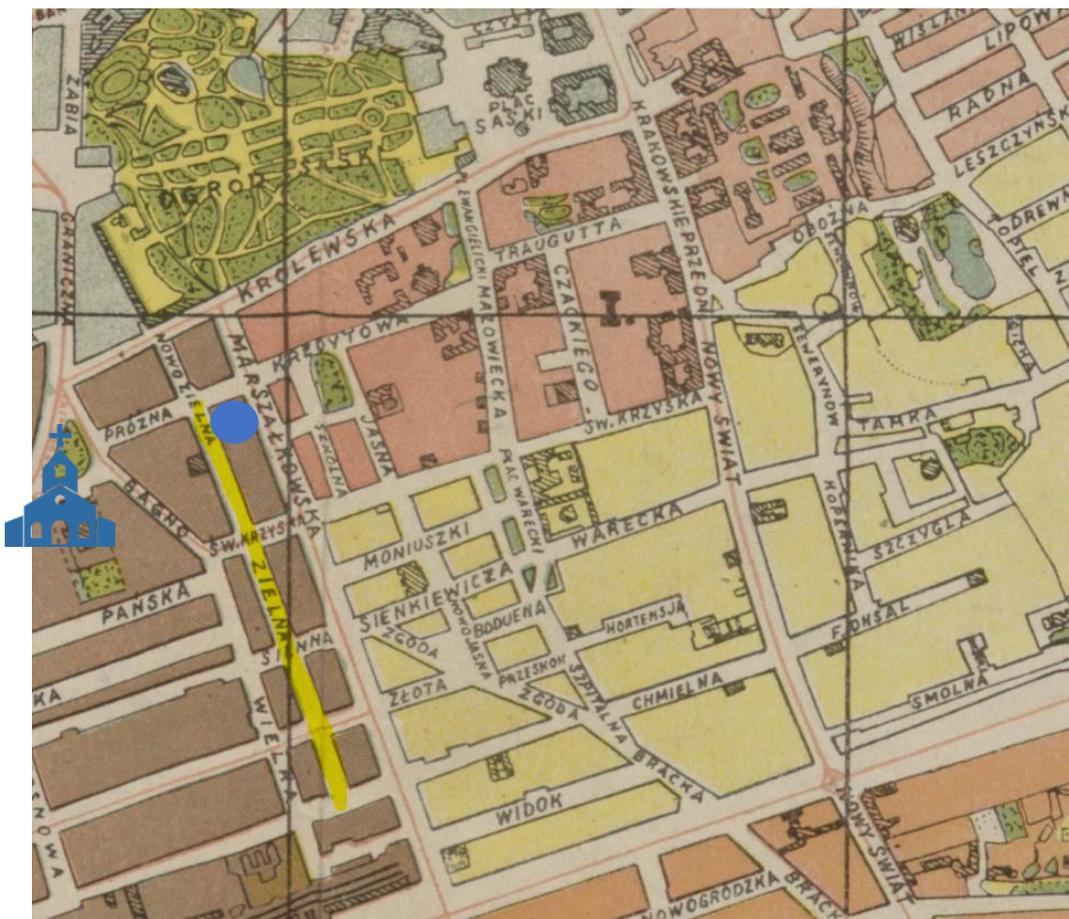
Since 1910, the Książyk Family had been living **ulica Zielna 24**. Located in the centre of Warsaw (Śródmieście), Zielna was busy street. This photo pictures the façade of the building with a flat neo-classical roof and stone balconies. In 1920, this building had an inner courtyard with a few trees.





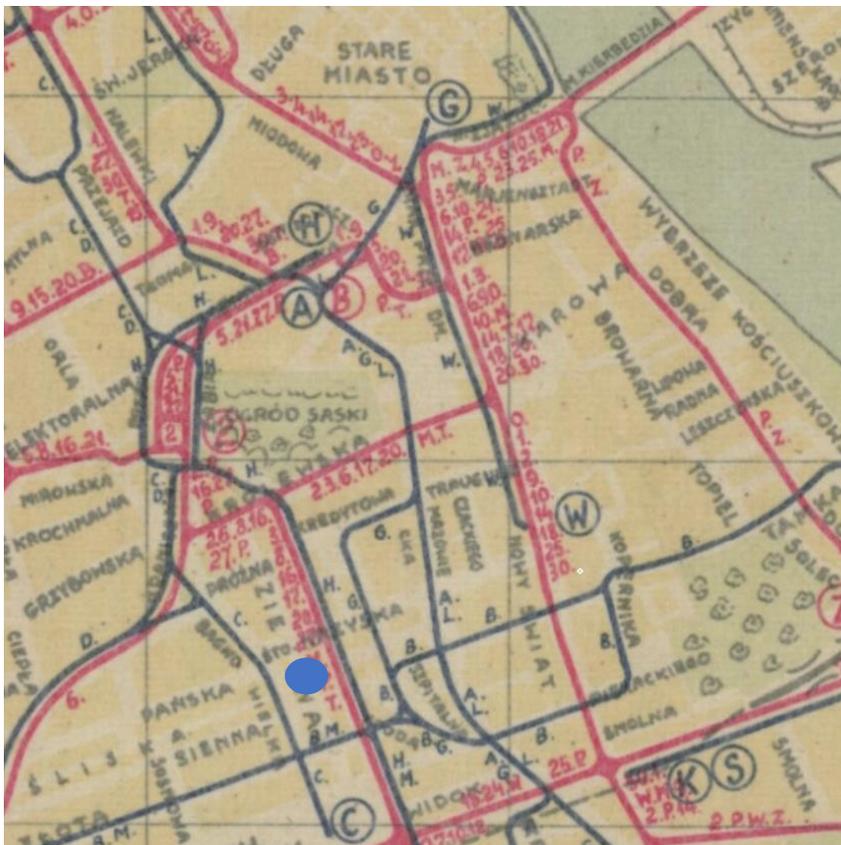
This [map of 1920](#) highlights the location of Ulica Zielna, not far from the Saxon Garden (*Ogród Saski*). Ulica Zielna was just in the back of Marszałkowska ul., the main shopping avenue of the city.

Zielna 24, the building of the Książyk Family, was located in the block at the corner of ul. Świętokrzyska.





Ulica Zielna was just in the back of Marszałkowska ul (left), the main shopping avenue of the city. Zielna 24, the building of the Książyk Family, was located in the block at the corner of ul. Świętokrzyska (right).



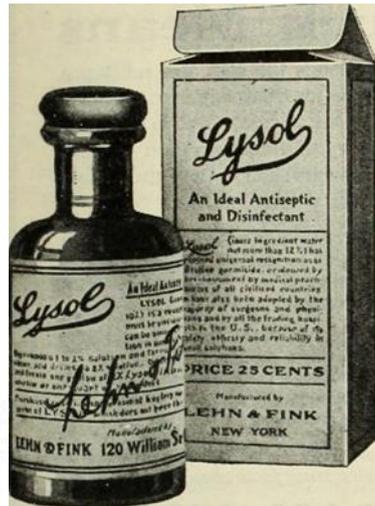
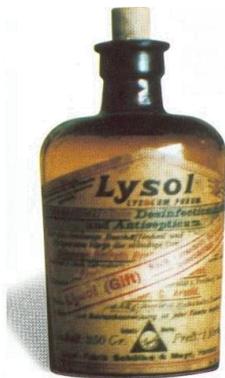
In 1920, ul. Zielna was mostly a residential street. In spite of a rather large road, tramways were not serving this street. Still, their traffic was intense in the adjacent Marszałkowska and Królewska streets. Many people walked across Zielna as a connecting street between tram stations.

## Self-lockdown

During the hiszpanka pandemic, authorities did not rule a lockdown in Warsaw but the flu put the city under an invisible siege. Local authorities recommended to limit human interactions and the isolation of sick persons.

During several months for the Książyk children, the only authorized outing was the Holy Mass at the All Saints Church (*Kościół Wszystkich Świętych*) on Sunday evening because less people attended at this late hour. The family suspended most of the “outside routine”. Jozefa stopped her grocery trips to Hala Mirowska. Walenty did not attend his political club anymore. For him, this was a grim sacrifice considering the effervescent political life of the young II Republic. The boys had to stay home, longing for some exceptional event and dreaming of a walk in Park Ujazdowski.





Produced by a German company in based in Hamburg and sold by the American firm Lehn & Fink, disinfectant Lysol had gained a worldwide reputation. This product was imported in Poland but during the pandemic, only few housewives could pay the prohibitive price.

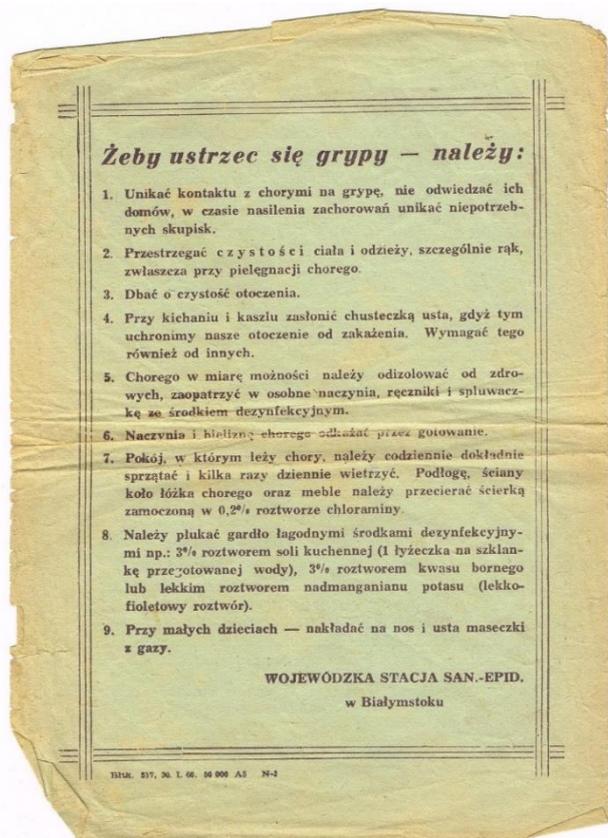
## Hygiene Rules

Very early, Warsaw authorities launched an education campaign with leaflets presenting some basic rules. One of them recommended the frequent disinfection of toilets and lavatory as well as door and window knobs.

The campaign also insisted on a rigorous hands hygiene. This precaution was strictly enforced in the Książyk house. Jozefa had a 0 tolerance for escaping the rule and the boys were under permanent scrutiny.



The "soap with a stag" (*Mydło z Jeleniem*) was very popular during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. Produced by the Polish subsidiary Schicht-Lever in Warsaw, this product was sold in barres of two or more cubes.

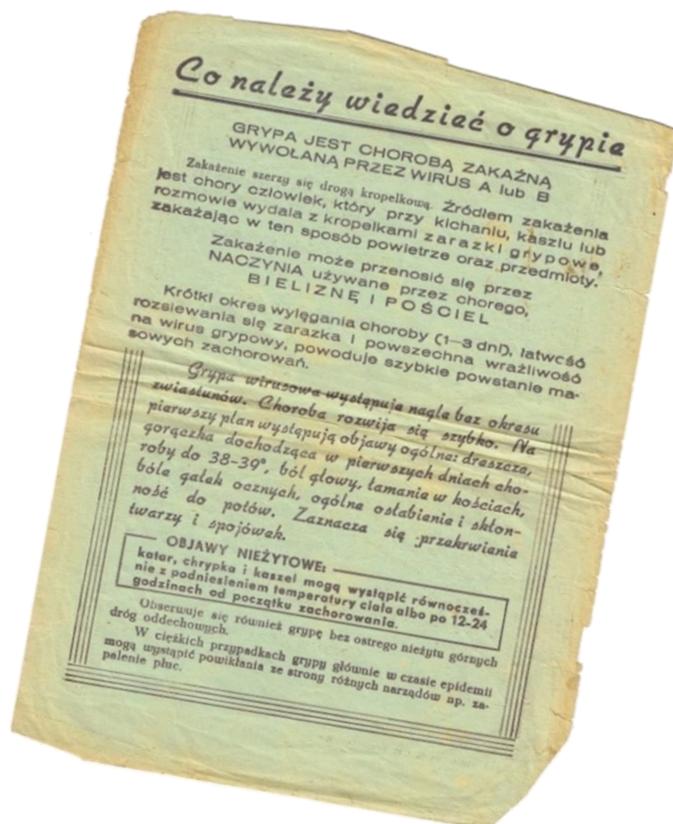


◀ Leaflet distributed by the hygiene authorities in Warsaw. The text provides a recipe for homemade soap with kitchen salt, boric acid or potash. This document recommends to isolate sick persons in a regularly ventilated room and to wash their objects and immediate environment with chlore. The text insists on prevention by covering the nose and mouth of little children with a gauze fabric.



Haradawa Archiwum Cyfrowe, sygn. 1-10-1644

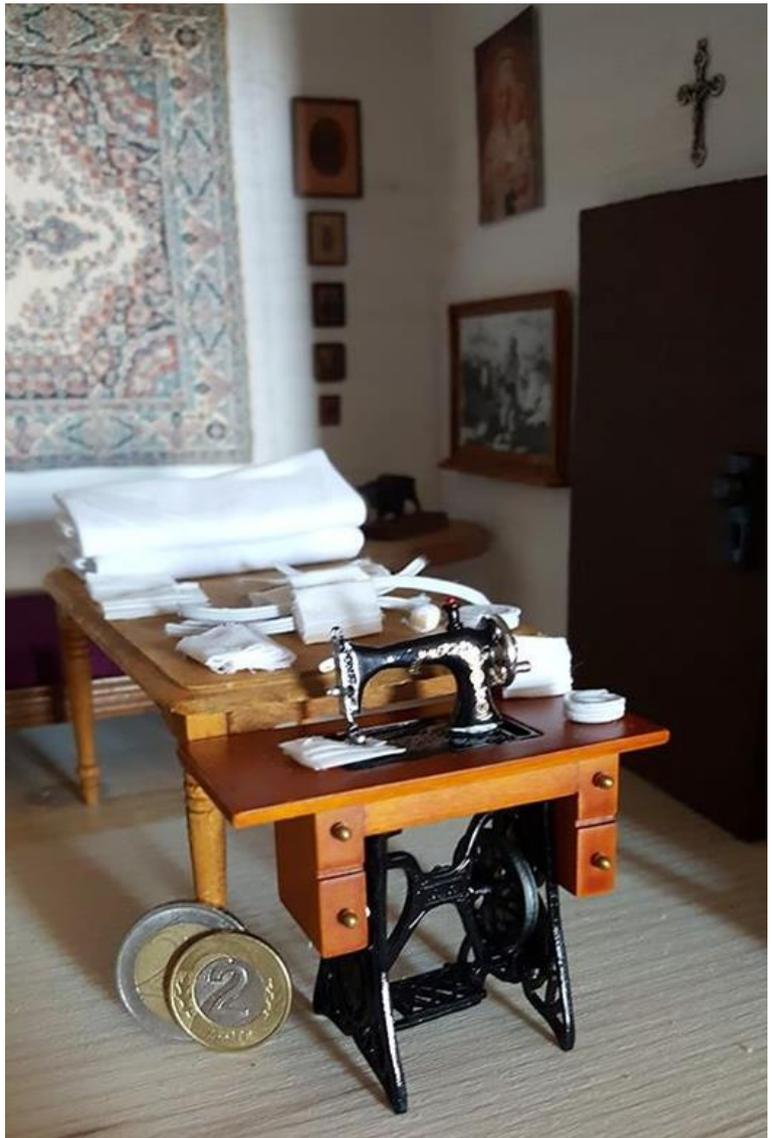
◀ This leaflet informs about incubation, symptoms, development and possible complications of the flu. The text also warns about the risks of contagion from underwear or bedlinens in contact with the patient.



## Sewing Room

At the request of the Women's Committee of the parish, Małgorzata joined the “home brigades”. The purpose was to organize a sewing room for the production of masks. She had excellent needlework skills and her contribution was precious to guide young learners.

The post-WWI period was a time of scarcity. Thread and needles were precious. All the scraps of fabric and even bits of thread were put aside, preciously stored and reused. Masks had to be sewn in fabrics that could boil (cotton or linen). With the approval of her mother, Małgorzata decided to sacrifice a few sheets from her future trousseau to sew homemade masks. There is no doubt that this massive mobilization of women contributed to mitigate the impact of the flu in Poland.





## Home Schooling

The schools had remained open, but many parents kept their children at home. This point was a bone of contention in the Książyk house. Walenty argued that school was expensive enough to send back the boys. Jozefa was resolutely opposed to an overexposure of her children and wanted to keep them home. Her position prevailed.

Already banned from all outdoor activities, the two boys experienced a series of complete lockdowns. Home schooling was organized during the two peaks of hiszpanka waves.

An older cousin, student at the Sciences University, was tasked with the challenge of teaching algebra. Actually, he focused on his specialty: geology and mineralogy. Walenty was recruited in support to Polish learning but he decided that improving in French would be equally useful. Jozefa, a self-appointed principal and general supervisor, was in charge of coordinating.

The result was an observable improvement in grammar and conjugation with a daily dictation. The boys also developed an amazing expertise in late Cretaceous ammonites.



©Książyk

## Battling the Flu

As most of the Książyk girls, Małgorzata had a strong health with an athletic type. However, she got the flu during the last weeks of 1919. This was probably caused by her support to Eastern refugees. Her hiszpanka symptoms were clearly identified: moderate fever, general weakness and a loss of appetite.

Fortunately, Małgorzata did not developed a serious form of disease. While very weakened, she did not suffer from the respiratory problems that gave a terrible blackish colour to the face and hands of cyanotic patients.

But for Jozefa there was no innocuous disease. During the two weeks of confinement, she was the only person to enter the bedroom of her beloved (and only) daughter. Meals were served on a tray and the dishes were carefully scalded after use. So were all the clothes and bedlinen.

In the Książyk house, this period was a time of silent anxiety. Reportedly, the two boys had never been so quiet, obedient and diligent. Małgorzata recovered rapidly after three weeks of complete rest in her bedroom. "*What does not kill you makes you stronger*". This aphorism inspired by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche applied to her.





## Suspicious medicines

In 1919, reliable medicines were quite limited. Poland had no significant pharmacy industry and most medical drugs were produced in the back-shop of the local *apteka* (pharmacy). This sector was governed by irrelevant regulations inherited from the occupant powers during the partition period.

Newspapers frequently reported casualties caused by fake medicines or adulterated products. For these reasons, during the flu pandemic in Warsaw, many Poles favoured imported medication in spite of their skyrocketing prices.

The Ministry of Public Health was established in May 1918 and in July 1919, the Basic Sanitary Act was a first and much expected regulation to organize the chaotic pharmacy business.



Calming elixir and tonic potion from a local Polish production.



Cough syrup imported from France. Sold zł6 in Poland as mentioned on the label.

Epidemia influency, zwanej „hiszpańską”, przybiera obecnie rozmiary przestraszające, zwłaszcza ze względu na groźne powikłania. Ponieważ zarazki tej choroby przedostają się do ustroju przez usta i drogi oddechowe górną, przeto jedynym środkiem zapobiegawczym jest

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Apteka pod Aniołem Stróżem', ul. Kościuszki 18 in Krakow



Apteka "Pod Aniołem" in Tamowska Góra



Picture from Aptekarz Polski

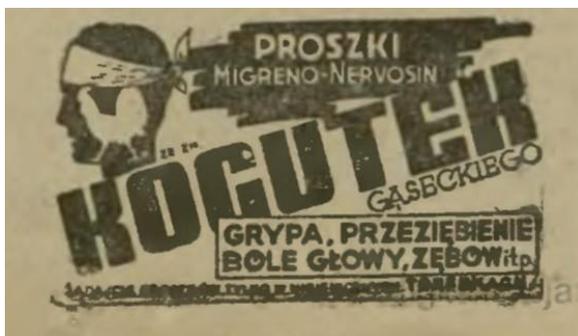
In 1919, herbal shops were widely considered as first choice pharmacies because the drugs industry lacked regulation and control. After the establishment of the Ministry of Health in 1918, the sanitary law of 19 July 1919 was the first attempt for a unique and centralized regulation of pharmacy in Poland. In 1923, this law was completed with further regulations regarding drugs production, prices and safety.



Fotografia ze zbiorów Muzeum Farmacji Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego Collegium Medicum w Krakowie



**Kogutek** (cockerel) was a very popular powder analgic. Initially named “Migreno-Nervosin”, this medicine was launched by Adolf Gąsecki in 1908.

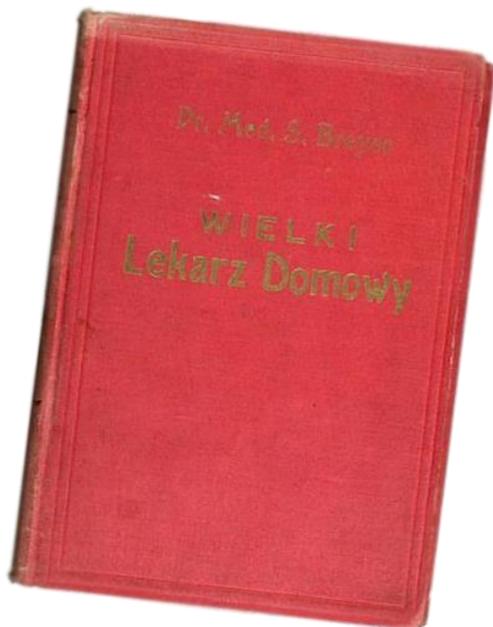


In 1919, a mass production was developed in Warsaw. Kogutek was sold as a white powder packaged in a paper-mache box. The powder was to be dissolved in sugared water.

## Home therapies

The death of Babcia Julianna highlighted that grandmother recipes might be useful to reduce some syndromes but failed to eliminate lethal viruses. Yet, many “medical guides” were circulating. In newspapers, there was a proliferation of home therapies against the flu. Some aimed at “getting rid of evil” with enemas and laxatives. Others focused on relieving respiratory pain with suction cups, snail slime syrup and camphor poultices. Eucalyptus fumigations and other herbal inhalations were used as air sanitizer. Phosphatine was a restorative food bedridden and sick people.

In 1919, *kompot* was one of the most popular home therapies. This word can be translated by grog or toddy. Every Polish family had a recipe against seasonal flu. Usually, they mixed boiled fruits (apples, pears, plums) with honey and some “warming spices” such as cloves, cinnamon, ginger root, cardamom or anise stars. Expansive “colonial” fruits, orange and citrus, were exceptionally added.



*Wielki Lekarz Domowy* - Great Home Doctor – Stanisław Breyer - 1913





These drawing positions the fumigation under a chair where the sick person would sit to get the benefits of medicinal plants.



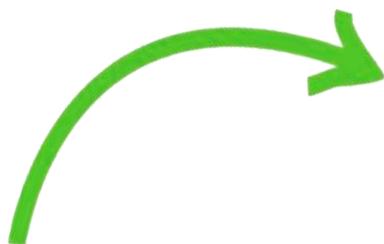
During the pandemic, the old bedwarmers returned to active service. Several times a day, the air was sanitized with a fumigation that included eucalyptus leaves, marjoram, cypress, cloves and dry lemon peels.

Wrongly ignored today, **snail slime syrup** has antibacterial properties and is an excellent cough medicine. Common snails also named Burgundy snails (*Helix pomatia*) are the best for slime production.

The recipe is very simple. Snails are packed together with eucalyptus leaves and cloves into a hanging jute bag. In reaction, they produce much slime that is collected in a basin put under the bag. Then the slime is filtered and boiled with thyme, cinnamon and honey. The consumption of this syrup is recommended before two weeks.



**Onion syrup** was (and remains) another popular medicine against the flu. Onion has anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties. This syrup lowers the fever, relieve bronchi, and calm throat pains. The recipe is the easier you can find: just pile up layers of cut onions and layers of sugar in a jar. The right balance is 2 tablespoons of sugar for one onion. Honey can replace sugar for its bactericidal, anti-inflammatory, analgesic and antiallergic properties. For a better taste, a few cloves, one anise flower and lemon juice can be added. After a few hours, the onions begin to release juice. After two days, the preparation is filtered through a colander.



**kompot z suszu i  
przyprawami**

Traditional Polish  
winter tea with dry  
fruits and spices.





Real tea  
in the cup!



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